

# Gamete donors' expectations and experiences of contact with their donor offspring

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Submitted on December 18, 2013; resubmitted on January 20, 2014; accepted on January 24, 2014

**STUDY QUESTION:** What are the expectations and experiences of anonymous gamete donors about contact with their donor offspring?

**SUMMARY ANSWER:** Rather than consistently wanting to remain distant from their donor offspring, donors' expectations and experiences of contact with donor offspring ranged from none to a close personal relationship.

**WHAT IS KNOWN ALREADY:** Donor conception is part of assisted reproduction in many countries, but little is known about its continuing influence on gamete donors' lives.

**STUDY DESIGN, SIZE, DURATION:** A qualitative research model appropriate for understanding participants' views was employed; semi-structured interviews were conducted during January–March 2013.

**PARTICIPANTS/MATERIALS, SETTING, METHODS:** Before 1998, gamete donors in Victoria, Australia, were subject to evolving legislation that allowed them to remain anonymous or (from 1988) to consent to the release of identifying information. An opportunity to increase knowledge of donors' expectations and experiences of contact with their donor offspring recently arose in Victoria when a recommendation was made to introduce mandatory identification of donors on request from their donor offspring, with retrospective effect. Pre-1998 donors were invited through an advertising campaign to be interviewed about their views, experiences and expectations; 36 sperm donors and 6 egg donors participated.

**MAIN RESULTS AND THE ROLE OF CHANCE:** This research is unusual in achieving participation by donors who would not normally identify themselves to researchers or government inquiries. Qualitative thematic analysis revealed that most donors did not characterize themselves as parents of their donor offspring. Donors' expectations and experiences of contact with donor offspring ranged from none to a close personal relationship.

**LIMITATIONS, REASONS FOR CAUTION:** It is not possible to establish whether participants were representative of all pre-1998 donors.

**WIDER IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS:** Anonymous donors' needs and desires are not homogeneous; policy and practice should be sensitive and responsive to a wide range of circumstances and preferences. Decisions made to restrict or facilitate contact or the exchange of information have ramifications for donors as well as for donor-conceived people.

**STUDY FUNDING/COMPETING INTEREST(S):** The study was funded by the Victorian Department of Health. The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

**TRIAL REGISTRATION NUMBER:** Not applicable.

**Key words:** donor-assisted conception / donor anonymity / sperm donors / egg donors / psychosocial

## Introduction

What do gamete donors feel about their donor offspring, decades after donating? Do they want to know who they are? Or even meet them?

: Although donor-assisted conception is an established aspect of assisted re-  
: production in many countries, little attention appears to have been given to  
: the interests of gamete donors in relation to their donor offspring. Sperm  
: donation, in particular, was developed on the understanding that donors

must not be allowed to disrupt the lives of recipients or donor-conceived people; the best donor was an invisible donor. To this end, secrecy surrounded the process and donor anonymity was enforced (Barton et al., 1945; Ciba Foundation, 1973), even to the extent that potential participants in the donor insemination process could be rejected if they planned to tell anyone about it (Finegold, 1964). Clinical practice in donor insemination was influenced by the shame once accruing to male infertility, by accusations of adultery and by the distaste associated with the necessity for masturbation (Kirkman, 2004b; Allan, 2012).

Over the years, emphasis changed from protecting the recipient (heterosexual) couple and the man's masculinity to constructing as a moral question the donor-conceived person's right to knowledge of his or her genealogy (Turkmendag, 2012). There have long been calls from donor-conceived people to allow them to have access to their donors' identity, regardless of when donations were made or any guarantees or expectations of anonymity operating at the time (e.g. Adams and Lorbach, 2012; Blyth et al., 2012). One US survey of donor-conceived adults, all in a support group for donor offspring, found that 25.0% wanted identifying information, 35.7% wanted to meet their donor once and 26.2% wanted to establish a relationship with their donor (Mahlstedt et al., 2010).

Although anonymous donation continues to be practised in most jurisdictions around the world (Allan, 2012), the growing acceptance of the need or even the right of donor-conceived people to know about and potentially know their donors means that anonymity is increasingly proscribed. For example, the Netherlands legislated in 2004 to give donor-conceived people access to information about the identity of their donors (Janssens et al., 2006), as did the UK for donations made after 1 April 2005 (Cohen, 2004) and the US state of Washington in 2011 (Ravitsky, 2012). The Australian states of Victoria, New South Wales, Western Australia and South Australia have each legislated to prohibit anonymous gamete donation (Johnson et al., 2012), as have Sweden, Austria, Switzerland, Norway, Finland and New Zealand (Allan, 2012). Australian fertility clinics are now required to collect and maintain records of identifying and other information about donors (Hammarberg et al., 2011). Recently, the Ethics Committee of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine (2013) noted that professional opinion in the USA changed from recommending anonymous donation in 1993 to accepting known donation in 2002.

Donors themselves may endorse the rights of donor offspring to have information about their donors. One survey of donors in Germany, a country in which secrecy in donor conception was practised to the extent that, until 2006, documents were destroyed after 10 years, found that 43% of surveyed sperm donors were willing to be identifiable (Thorn et al., 2008). None had received any information about or had any contact with their donor offspring. Legislated removal of donor anonymity has not necessarily resulted in fewer sperm donors (Shukla et al., 2013); some anonymous donors welcome the removal of donor anonymity (Daniels et al., 2012).

Now that voices of donor-conceived people are being heard, debate is growing on the rights of donors to have access to information about their donor offspring (Raes et al., 2013). There is evidence that, even when sperm donors were recruited under conditions of anonymity, some are interested in the outcome of their donations, think about their possible donor offspring and might be willing to meet them (Daniels, 1989). However, there is little research on donors' psychosocial needs and experiences in the years after donation. It has been claimed that research has tended to neglect the donor as a stakeholder and that there are few

follow-up studies of donors (Van den Broeck et al., 2013). In their review of the small body of literature, Van den Broeck et al. (2013) concluded that most donors are willing to reveal non-identifying information and that donors believe that offspring, not donors, should initiate contact.

In summarizing the results of the existing research, it should be noted at the outset that it includes only donors who were willing to come forward to participate in research (which is unavoidable in most research), many of whom are part of an active, sometimes activist, donor conception community (of offspring, donors and parents). There remains a much larger group of donors whose perspectives are not tapped, perhaps because they value their privacy, although explanations must usually, by definition, be speculative.

Diverse attitudes to the exchange of information and curiosity about donor offspring appear to be common in this limited knowledge base. Research conducted through the US-based Donor Sibling Registry, an online forum for all parties in the donor conception process who are prepared to share personal information, found that almost all sperm and egg donors were open to having contact with their donor offspring (Daniels et al., 2012) and that some desire identifying information about them (Jadva et al., 2011). It was also found that donors understood their connection with their donor offspring along a range from 'A genetic relationship only' to 'Like my own child' (Jadva et al., 2011). Given that the goal of the registry is to share information, it is notable that not all donors want contact and some derive little meaning from the biological connection. Some sperm donors were concerned about potentially feeling responsible for offspring experiencing hardship or reported that their wives worried about donor offspring who might make financial or emotional demands on the family (Jadva et al., 2011). A donor's inclusion on a voluntary register does not necessarily entail a desire to have a relationship with the donor offspring. Although some donors registered with the UK's DNA-based DonorLink voluntary register would welcome relationships with their offspring, others were apprehensive about contact (Crawshaw et al., 2013). Donors can feel a sense of responsibility to their donor offspring, making themselves available if their offspring need to know them, without wanting a relationship or even contact with them (Kirkman, 2004a). An Australian survey that recruited through donor support networks found that donors wanted offspring to take account of donors' feelings about being contacted (Rodino et al., 2011).

A survey of UK semen donors from the early 1990s, conducted at the time of donation, found that almost half would like to know whether there were any births from their donations, but only 15% wanted contact with their donor offspring (Cook and Golombok, 1995). Recent qualitative research with 15 men who donated sperm in the UK from the late 1960s to the early 1980s found that, although none had had any contact with their donor offspring, all were, to some extent, curious about them, especially about whether they resembled the donor (Speirs, 2012). Some donors were concerned about contact from offspring, others would welcome it, but only one donor had registered with the UK DonorLink for the voluntary exchange of information (Speirs, 2012). When the UK voluntary register was proposed, it was found that past semen donors often wanted to know the outcome of their donation and, although none had met their donor offspring, some were prepared for a single meeting or a brief exchange of information and a few were interested in developing a relationship with their offspring (Crawshaw et al., 2007).

A review of research on anonymous egg donors found that they often want to know the outcome of their donations and a 'significant

proportion' would consider allowing contact from their donor offspring (Purewal and van den Akker, 2009). Egg donors in Australia, where donors cannot be paid, may have a pre-existing relationship with their recipients which will increase the likelihood of having contact with their donor offspring. Even then, however, the nature of the relationship and the amount of contact desired by the donor varies (Kirkman, 2003a). Of 15 women in Canada who had altruistically donated eggs to a friend or family member, only 10 said that their donor offspring had a right to know that they were donor-conceived (Yee *et al.*, 2011).

The very scant research investigating, from the donor's perspective, experiences of contact between donors and the donor offspring tends to involve donors who have voluntarily registered their willingness to be identified. An online survey of 63 sperm donors and 11 oocyte donors on the Donor Sibling Registry found that 22 sperm donors and 1 oocyte donor had been in contact with their donor offspring; only 8 involved in-person meetings (Jadva *et al.*, 2011). Most were reported as positive experiences; unhappy experiences included contact being severed by the donor-conceived child's mother.

The current evidence does not permit confident comparisons to be made between sperm and egg donors in their expectations or experience of contact with their donor offspring, especially when considering donations made under conditions of donor anonymity. In Victoria to 1998, sperm donors constituted the overwhelming majority of gamete donors in general and those who donated anonymously in particular.

Given the limited evidence from donors in the decades after they have donated, the aim of this research was to understand the expectations and experiences of contact with their donor offspring expressed by sperm and egg donors who donated under conditions of anonymity or confidentiality. Donors who would, under most circumstances, never identify themselves as donors by volunteering for research were prompted to come forward in Victoria, Australia, by a recent, highly publicized recommendation made to parliament: that legislation be introduced to enforce mandatory identification of donors on request from their donor offspring, with retrospective effect.

## Background to the research in Victoria, Australia

Victoria was one of the first jurisdictions in the world to introduce legislation [*Infertility (Medical Procedures) Act 1984 (Vic)*] regulating donor-assisted conception (Johnson *et al.*, 2012). Its enactment in 1988 mandated that records be kept of identifying information about donors, recipients and children born as a result of the donation. As a condition of donating from 1988 (to 1998), donors consented to the recording of identifying information on a Central Register, although information can be released to donor-conceived people only with the donor's consent. Subsequent legislation [*Infertility Treatment Act 1995 (Vic)*], enacted in 1998 and affecting donations made from that date, required the donor to consent, at the time of donating, to the release of identifying information upon the request of a donor-conceived person. The 1995 legislation also mandated the establishment of a Voluntary Register to record information about donors, recipients, and donor-conceived people involved in donor-assisted conception before the 1984 legislation was implemented (or were not registered for other reasons), who volunteered the information. The Voluntary Register, which became operational in 2001, also provides a mechanism for donor-conceived half-siblings and parents who have used the same donor to exchange information and make contact.

Donors are well represented on Victoria's Voluntary Register which, by 30 June 2013, contained details of 188 donors, 83 donor-conceived people, and 158 recipient parents, among whom 85 matches had been achieved (Victorian Assisted Reproductive Treatment Authority, 2013). The most persuasive explanation for the inclusion of fewer registrations from donor-conceived people is that many conceived before 1988 have not been told.

In response to concern expressed by some donors and donor offspring that people conceived with the assistance of donors before 1998 were disadvantaged in their access to information about their donors, the Victorian Parliament's Law Reform Committee (LRC) recommended legislation to allow all donor-conceived people to obtain identifying information about their donors, regardless of when the donations had been made (Law Reform Committee, 2012). Before deciding whether to implement the recommendations, the Victorian Government requested further insights from men and women who donated gametes in Victoria before 1998, when it became mandatory for donor-conceived people to have access to identifying details about their donor without the donor's permission. The investigation was conducted by Monash University, reporting through VARTA. Results pertaining to donors' views on the release of identifying information have been reported (Hammarberg *et al.*, 2013). Donors also discussed their expectations and experiences of contact with their donor offspring; these results are reported here.

## Method

### Ethics committee approval

The research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Victorian Department of Health, #15/12, and all participants gave informed consent.

### Study design and population

People who donated sperm or eggs in Victoria, Australia, before 1998 were eligible to participate. In the absence of complete records of these donations, it is not possible to specify how many donors (either in total or still alive) fulfil this criterion nor to define the population of donors. Given this fundamental limitation, it was impossible to conduct a representative survey of donors. Furthermore, because we sought donors' views and experiences without making assumptions about what they might be, a qualitative investigation was deemed appropriate.

### Recruitment

Volunteers for participation in interviews were sought through an advertising and media campaign from December 2012 to February 2013, emphasizing the desire to speak to people who had not previously been heard. An advertising company was consulted to craft sensitive print and radio advertisements that conveyed the scope of the consultation and reassured potential participants that confidentiality would be assured. Full-colour advertisements appeared in the two Victorian daily newspapers and audio advertisements were played on a popular radio station. Information about the consultation was included on the VARTA website and in the VARTA e-Newsletter. A Facebook post describing the consultation was placed on the Monash University Alumni website. A media release generated substantial interest from print media and radio. Feature articles appeared in the two daily papers and researchers were interviewed on two radio stations; one interview was later available as a well-publicized podcast. At the same time, prominent news items discussed the proposed mandatory loss of anonymity with

retrospective effect, most of which evaluated it as beneficial to donor-conceived people and thus desirable (e.g. Tomazin, 2013).

## Procedure

Potential participants were requested to contact VARTA for information about the consultation. Those who chose to proceed after reading the Information and Consent Form were asked for permission to give their contact details to the researchers who then sought an appointment for an interview (in person or by telephone) or to arrange a written response to the interview questions.

In addition to questions about the LRC's recommendations and requests for factual information, the interview guide asked donors to give an account of their experience of donating and of subsequent related events and reflections, including the request to 'tell me your story about being a donor'. Donors were asked whether they had been contacted by their donor offspring, but not asked directly about whether they had met or hoped to meet them. The interview guide was sent to participants who chose to respond in writing; it is available from the authors. Questions were open-ended and encouraged participants to expand on matters of significance to them. Although all topics were covered in each oral interview, the order could be adapted to the conversational direction taken by each participant. Interviewers asked follow-up questions (not specified in advance) as appropriate.

Oral interviews were conducted in a private, sound-proof room by M.K. or K.H., audio-recorded (with consent) and transcribed by an experienced transcriber who had signed a confidentiality agreement. All participants were asked to choose a pseudonym.

## Analysis

Identifying information was removed from or disguised in the transcripts and written contributions before analysis. Demographic details were recorded separately, without names or addresses. Thematic analysis of transcripts and written responses was conducted by M.K., in consultation with the research team. Thematic analysis was performed in an iterative process consistent with that described by Braun and Clarke (2006): transcripts were searched for themes related to expectations or experiences of contact with donor offspring, a thematic scheme was developed and transcripts were read again to ensure the scheme was comprehensive and appropriate. The scheme was amended accordingly and transcripts re-read to ensure accuracy and select illustrative quotations.

## Results and Discussion

### Recruitment and participants

VARTA received 55 inquiries about participation, of which 6 were deemed not to fit the eligibility criteria. Participant Information and Consent Forms were requested by and sent to 49 donors, of whom 45 agreed to have their contact details forwarded to the researchers; 42 were successfully contacted and interviewed.

Interviews were conducted January to March 2013; 30 were by telephone, 6 were in person and 6 were in writing. In addition to the seven who emphasized that they volunteered only because they feared losing their anonymity should the recommended legislation be enacted, three donors took steps to ensure that their contributions were unidentifiable, one by telephoning the interviewer, one by establishing a special email account and the third by mailing his written responses after arranging to receive the questions anonymously. Some participants sent subsequent emails (one of more than 6000 words)

and made follow-up telephone calls to ensure that they had communicated all that they wanted to say. The three modes of communication each produced both lengthy and succinct responses. The oral interviews had the highest word count; these included the interviewer's contribution and unscripted conversational components. In-person oral interviews ranged from 2356 words (in 16 min) to 8550 words (in 48 min). (There were some longer interviews with fewer words.) Telephone interviews yielded from 1969 words (16 min) to 7853 words (47 min). Written contributions were the briefest, from 343 words to 1231 words. They included only the succinct questions and no conversational contributions from the interviewer; participants who wrote their views tended to reply in a few words to questions about proposed legislative changes and to expand on their explanations and experiences.

Participants were 36 sperm donors and 6 egg donors aged 40–73 who had donated gametes from 1970 to 1997; 28 of them had donated before 1988. Donations were reported as having been made at all six clinics that we are aware were functioning during this period. Thirty-two of the donors knew that births (up to 36) had resulted from their donations; 10 donors had had contact with their donor offspring. There is no way of knowing whether participants are representative of all pre-1998 donors. However, the contribution of otherwise 'silent' donors and the diversity of the sample in age, year and place of donation, disclosure patterns, knowledge about the outcome of their donation, and whether or not they had been approached by their donor offspring or joined the Voluntary Register (25 had done so) provides some assurance that the views come from a broad range of donors. A little more than half of the participating donors rejected the recommended mandatory release of identifying information (Hammarberg et al., 2013).

Despite contrasts in the meaning of sperm donation and egg donation (e.g. Kirkman, 2004b) and in the greater physical demands of egg donation, the only identifiable difference found between egg donors and sperm donors was that none of the former was categorized as rejecting the central recommendation outright: egg donors either supported the recommended mandatory loss of anonymity with retrospective effect, or rejected it and proposed a compromise position. This distribution may be attributable to the smaller number of egg donors, but is also consistent with the practice of egg donation having developed after donor anonymity was no longer accepted in Victoria. In their explanations for reaching their conclusions and their thoughts about donor-conceived people, the same range of views was found among egg donors as among sperm donors.

### Donors' expectations and experiences of contact with their donor offspring

All donors who agreed with the mandatory release of identifying information were willing to be identified to and contacted by their donor offspring, as were some who rejected this recommendation. Before reporting donors' expectations and experiences of contact, we describe donors' understanding of their status in relation to their donor offspring.

### Donors as parents or non-parents

It was evident that donors understood their status in relation to people conceived from their gametes across a very wide range. At one extreme were those who saw the process as akin to donating blood; at the other were those who understood themselves a parent to any person conceived from their donation. It is inevitable that the way in which

donors conceptualized their status influences their attitudes to contact with their donor offspring.

The donor called Anon, for example, said that donor-conceived people should be satisfied with the parents who raised them; he, as the sperm donor, is not a parent: 'One of the things was that I wasn't intending to become a parent, and this was not me becoming a parent; this was me providing a service to other people who would be parents.' Similarly, Andrew denied that a sperm donor can be a parent, and described his efforts as 'minuscule' when compared with the work of parenting carried out by the child's social father, and Jerry T said, 'I've considered those children are their mum and dad's children, not mine'. Egg donor Sharon, who agreed with the proposed mandatory access to identifying information, said, 'I'm not a parent. I would never consider that I was any sort of parent, but certainly I've got a role in their life in just letting them know what their genetic heritage is'. When Donald wrote to the fertility clinic asking whether there were any births as a result of his donations (in order to avoid consanguineous relationships for his children), he was angry that the letter appeared to imply that these children were his family and equivalent to his own children. According to Donald, the letter said, "'You have one family of [several] children, and possibly another [child]". And I thought, "I don't have a family of donor-conceived children. I've got a family of my own". They should have said, "There are [several] conceived children".' He was not prepared to consider that the use of the word 'family' in the letter referred to siblings with the same parents, saying that the letter, in conjunction with the proposed changes, meant that 'they're trying to impose a family on me'.

Donors can characterize themselves differently in relation to each of their donor offspring. For example, Wayne had developed a relationship with one of his (about 10) donor offspring and considered himself to be the father of this person, who had briefly lived with his family; he said he had no need to develop a parental relationship with the remaining offspring, should they contact him. Wayne thought his wife and children were becoming accustomed to the idea of this new person in the family.

Donors may also change their perspectives. At the time of donating, Noel said he saw it as like blood donation but, after the birth of his own children and learning that he had donor offspring, he said that he thought, 'I've given away [almost 10] of my children, and I did it with the best of intentions, absolutely, but I've given away [almost 10] of my children, and I have no idea what their fate has been.'

Michael B is also at the 'parent' end of the parental distribution. He wrote unequivocally that 'In fundamental human relationship terms the donor is their father. The donor, and legislators, should affirm that he is their father.' Michael B's views are in direct contrast to arguments that the donation of gametes does not grant parental status (Turkmendag, 2012). A US lawyer has argued that careful distinctions have been made between disclosing information about their donors to donor-conceived people and recognizing donors as parents (Cahn, 2012). She makes it clear that, in legal and ethical terms, the exchange of information does not entail attribution of parental rights and responsibilities to donors when a jurisdiction enacts laws providing for the release of such information (Cahn, 2012). As Michael B demonstrates, however, not all donors accept this view.

## Donors' expectations of contact with their donor offspring

In keeping with their varied characterizations of their status, donors had a wide range of expectations about contact with people conceived from

their sperm or eggs. Donors' expectations were categorized as (i) wanting or expecting no contact of any kind; (ii) fearing contact; (iii) fearing consanguineous relationships; (iv) acceptance of the donor-conceived person's need to know or know about their donor; (v) personal interest in how their genes had been transformed into a person; and (vi) desire for a relationship with their donor offspring. These categories are not mutually exclusive.

### *Expecting no contact*

Some donors had no expectation of any contact with their donor offspring. Luke, for example, who agreed with the mandatory release of identifying information, thought that his donor offspring might not know about him. He rang the clinic from time to time to find out how many children had been born and each time there were more; a few years ago, when the number exceeded 30, he received a letter asking him to join the Voluntary Register, which he did. However, Luke had not been contacted by any of his donor offspring and now expected no contact. In contrast, Michael A would not have consented to donate without a guarantee of anonymity and wanted nothing to do with his donor offspring. He wrote, 'My offspring owe their very existence to this guarantee which is why they should not feel cheated or offended by it. I consented to donate sperm with a view to assisting a couple to conceive. I did not consent to a relationship with my offspring at some future time nor did I accept the responsibilities that accompany any such relationship.' Gary, who expected to have no contact, said that he was troubled by men who donated 30 years ago and now seek a relationship with their donor offspring, describing them as 'weird'.

### *Fearing contact*

Some donors feared being pursued by their donor offspring, concerned about harms to themselves or their families. They mentioned a 'knock on the door' by someone claiming family membership, thereby damaging the family's understanding of itself and of the donor's loyalty; 'stalking' of the donor's children and extended family in person or through the internet; and demands or 'emotional blackmail' from a 'needy' or 'unstable' donor-conceived person. Peter Y, for example, said, 'My concern is that the person that's making the enquiry might be desperate for money, have a mindset that's a problem, and then create all sorts of other mental anguishes into my family.' Edward said his wife worried that he would 'put her and her family second' should he develop a relationship with a donor offspring, and Anon was adamant that any contact would 'cause a huge amount of tension in my relationship, you know? And potentially the relationship I have with my children.'

### *Fearing consanguineous relationships*

Donors also spoke of the more specific concern of avoiding consanguineous relationships. Sperm donor DC said he was interested in having non-identifying information about his donor offspring only to help his (adult) children avoid romantic attachments with genetic half-siblings. DC was prepared to provide non-identifying information for his donor offspring but wanted no contact and felt apprehensive that they might attempt to contact him and about any claims they might make on him. Similarly, Peter Y and Donald sought information about their donor offspring solely because of concerns that their children might form liaisons with them; they neither expect nor will they seek contact.

### *Accepting the donor-conceived person's potential need to know*

Some donors accepted that their donor offspring might need to know about their donor. George, for example, rang the clinic over the years to check whether his donations (in the 1990s) had resulted in births, and learnt that there were a few, all about 10 years after he had donated. He joined the Voluntary Register in case his donor offspring wanted to know about him but had not been contacted. Similarly, David P, a 1970s' donor, expressed the belief that the donor-conceived person's rights are paramount and was prepared for a relationship with his offspring out of respect for their need to know their genetic origins; he had met one of his offspring without developing a continuing relationship.

Some donors made it clear that they were not emotionally invested in a potential relationship with their offspring. A sperm donor who asked to be known as Utnapishtim said, 'If someone wants to make contact, I'm happy to make contact. If nobody ever does, I'm not going to go to my grave with a huge regret about what's out there and what's not out there.' Emily's views were similar; she wrote: 'I do not have any desire from my end to meet up with any children that may have resulted from my donation, but would not object to meeting up with a child if it was their wish to meet me for whatever the reason.' While Jim is 'interested' in finding out about his offspring, 'It's not vital to my existence or anything. . . . I'm not emotionally attached to the idea of revealing or not revealing or anything'.

Donors who accept that their donor offspring may need to know about them might feel apprehensive about what it may mean for them and their families. Edward said, 'I was really worried when I first got contact, I really did feel as though I was standing on the edge of the cliff and anyone could just walk up and push me over.' Owen, too, was on the Voluntary Register, prepared to be identified to his donor offspring in recognition of their needs; he had, nevertheless, a lingering concern about any potential legal burdens on the donor, such as claims on his assets. Concern about demands on the donor—financial, legal and emotional—were raised by donors despite apparent awareness that financial and legal claims on gamete donors are not valid in law. Their anxieties were aroused by the proposed changes to legislation with retrospective effect, which, they said, meant that they were not reassured by current legislative protection.

### *Inquisitive about the donor-conceived person*

A few donors were inquisitive about their donor offspring. For example, Elka said she had always been curious about the person she helped to conceive, and Dennis, having been contacted by one of his donor offspring, had become curious about the others. Quentin was married with children when he donated; he discussed it with his wife at the time and told his children as teenagers. Quentin and one of his children were interested in his donor offspring; Quentin accepted that whether or not they have contact is for each donor-conceived person to decide because donor-initiated contact 'could cause an awful lot of trouble that would be unwelcome and not appropriate'.

### *Desire for contact*

Some donors said they yearn for a relationship with their donor offspring. James even asserted he would have made more sperm donations had there been any chance of meeting 'my children'. Bruce would 'absolutely' like to know his donor offspring, saying, 'I could go on living for another 10 or 20 years but, if for some reason I don't, I would like to have met them.' Jack B knew that > 20 people were conceived from his donated sperm;

he was disappointed that none had contacted him, despite his presence on the Voluntary Register, although he had met the mother of one child. Jack B spoke of reading about relationships developing between donor-conceived people and their donors, and said, 'My dream would be one day to appear in one of those news stories with a happy reunion'.

After donating, Noel married, had children, and thought no more of his donations until he received a letter in the late 1990s telling him that he still had frozen sperm that would be used only for additional children in families already containing his donor offspring. Noel wept during his interview as he relived this astonishing, emotional moment when he suddenly realized there were people in the world as genetically close to him as his children. Noel said, 'Just once I'd like to look into their eyes and see them, and to see me', but declared that control over the extent of information and contact lies with donor-conceived people. John, who had no children of his own, said that he hesitates when asked if he has children, thinking of his donor offspring. He hoped they would contact him; none had done so. Because John's sister fears demands on his property he has consulted a solicitor to ensure that his will disallows any such claims on his estate. Donors' hopes and expectations are caught up with what it means to their immediate and extended families to have donor offspring, which appears from this group of donors to be complex and multi-layered.

A unique perspective was offered by Jenny, who had chosen not to have children and donated eggs in response to an advertisement in the 1990s. She expressed regret for donating to a woman who, the counsellor told her, was determined never to reveal to her children that they were donor-conceived. Jenny talked of her love for the child conceived from her egg, although they had never met and she knew nothing about the child except the sex. Jenny spoke of a friend who was adopted and whose adoptive mother severed their relationship when he was 21. Jenny was adamant that parents whose children were donor-conceived will similarly reject their children when they reach adulthood—'kick it out the door'—and declared that she will welcome the child born from her donation when he is set adrift by his family.

## **Reported donor and donor-offspring contact**

### *No contact*

Donors who wanted to retain the anonymity they had taken for granted since donating had experienced no contact with any donor-conceived people and wanted none; their desires matched their experiences. Other donors who were ready to be identified and may have joined the Voluntary Register were disappointed not to have been approached. Evan, for example, said he would 'open my door to any who want to know me', but none had attempted to make contact. Owen said he was disappointed to discover that none of his offspring is on the Voluntary Register, and Shelby had accepted that people conceived from her eggs may not have been told about their conception.

### *Minimal contact*

The minimal contact experienced by a few participants includes donors reporting that they had supplied requested information without further developments, and others having brief communication or meetings. For example, about 15 years before his interview, Jerry T was contacted by the infertility clinic because one of his donor offspring had developed a health problem of genetic origin; Jerry T was able to reply that it was not evident in his family's medical history. There was no further contact. Similarly, one of Noel's donor offspring asked for information through the

register; he wondered whether the person just wanted to know about his medical history because, perhaps, she shares a non-life-threatening inherited condition with him. The approach left Noel yearning for deeper personal knowledge of all his donor offspring.

David P is one example of a donor who met his donor offspring without developing a relationship. Another donor who had no children of his own met a young donor offspring several times at her request but their relationship dwindled. This donor identified himself as gay which, he said, was not a problem to his donor 'daughter' but might be difficult for a young male offspring, should there be one; he suspected that other offspring had been born. Other Australian researchers have identified potential differences between heterosexual and homosexual sperm donors, including in their investment in genetic continuity (Riggs and Scholz, 2011), although we know of no research about the experiences of sperm donors who are discovered by their donor offspring to be gay.

### Relationship

There was evidence that donors could develop significant relationships with their donor offspring; other family members were also drawn into the relationships. Egg donor Jill had agreed to be contacted by one young-adult donor offspring who made an approach through the Voluntary Register and, after months of emails, they met once and were planning to meet again. Jill described herself as wanting to proceed slowly to ensure a satisfactory outcome for all concerned; she was aware of vulnerabilities, especially in the donor offspring and in one of her own children of a similar age. Jill said she was lucky that her donor offspring was well adjusted, and volunteered that it could be difficult for a donor to be contacted by someone who is 'angry' or 'miserable with their life'. From longer experience of donor-offspring contact, Brett described his family as 'best friends' with the family of one of his donor offspring; he had also had many contacts with another family, and inquiries had been made by a third family which was yet to initiate contact. Michael B said that he was close to two of his donor offspring and that their relationships had been maintained over about 10 years.

David Q was initially approached by the mother of a donor-conceived child with whom he has developed a close relationship; this donor offspring is now aged about 30. David Q's wife met him after he had been a donor; knowledge that there were donor offspring was difficult for her, especially when David Q agreed to have contact. According to David Q, his wife had since accepted his relationship with his donor offspring whom she meets from time to time, along with their children. David Q expressed his belief that he would have had a deeper relationship with this young adult if his/her sibling's donor had not refused to have contact, causing profound distress. According to David Q, his donor offspring feels guilty about being lucky to have a donor who is willing to be known. Hurt feelings and distress were expressed by some of the 16 adult donor-conceived people surveyed in the 1990s when their anonymous donors failed to respond to the offspring's intense and persistent attempts to find them (Turner and Coyle, 2000). This appears to be one of the hazards confronting donor offspring when they approach donors who have not expressed willingness to be contacted.

## Conclusion

These results have important implications for policy and practice concerning donor-assisted conception. The needs of donors do not end

once their donations are made, and their needs and wants are not homogeneous. Policy and practice thus need to be developed to deal sensitively and responsively to a wide range of circumstances and preferences. In considering the needs and rights of donor-conceived people and their parents (who may find it difficult to incorporate the donor into their family narratives and to contemplate a relationship between their child and their child's donor: Kirkman, 2003b), the complex interests of donors should not be overlooked. Decisions made to restrict or facilitate contact or the exchange of information have ramifications for donors as well as for donor-conceived people.

We are aware that we cannot know how representative these 42 donors may be of pre-1998 donors in Victoria, let alone in any other jurisdiction. Nevertheless, we suggest that the diversity we have found is informative of the range of donors' attitudes rather than emphasizing any one perspective. In particular, this research was successful in encouraging participation by donors who have not previously made their views known, often more than 40 years after they donated. Some had been unaware of earlier attempts to consult donors and came forward at the first opportunity that was brought to their attention. A few became aware of discussion about donor identification only after reading in a newspaper about the Parliamentary Law Reform Committee's recommendations. Others were reluctant to put themselves in a position where they might be identified, and either trusted that researchers would protect their privacy or were satisfied with the steps they were able to take to retain complete anonymity.

This research contributes to knowledge about gamete donors, especially those who would not usually participate in research and are not members of groups set up to facilitate the exchange of information. In just over half a century, we have moved from a narrow view of the donor as merely a vehicle for enabling other people to have children to understanding that donating gametes can have lifelong effects on the donor.

## Acknowledgements

We thank the men and women who were willing to discuss their experiences and opinions of gamete donation, especially those who have done so for the first time and those who volunteered despite their fears that participation would leave them vulnerable to being identified.

## Authors' roles

M.K. made substantial contributions to conception and design, conducted interviews, analysed and interpreted data, drafted the manuscript and contributed to revision, and contributed to final approval of the version to be published. K.B. made substantial contributions to conception and design and interpretation of data, contributed to critical revision of the manuscript for important intellectual content and gave final approval of the version to be published. J.F. made substantial contributions to conception and design and interpretation of data, contributed to critical revision of the manuscript for important intellectual content and gave final approval of the version to be published. L.J. made substantial contributions to conception and design and interpretation of data, contributed to critical revision of the manuscript for important intellectual content and gave final approval of the version to be published. K.H. made substantial contributions to conception and design, conducted interviews, contributed to interpretation of data and critical revision of

the manuscript for important intellectual content and gave final approval of the version to be published.

## Funding

This research was funded by the Victorian Department of Health. Funding to pay the Open Access publication charges for this article was provided by the Victorian Assisted Reproductive Treatment Authority.

## Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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